



**Testimony of the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity  
Presented to the Children's Committee  
Tuesday, February 7, 2023 ~ 11:00 AM via Zoom**

**In Support of:**

**\*[S.B. No. 929](#) AN ACT EXPANDING SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS TO PROVIDE FREE SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS**

**\*[H.B. No. 5194](#) AN ACT ESTABLISHING A GRIEF COUNSELING PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN**

Dear Senator Maher, Representative Linehan, Senator Seminara, Representative Dauphinais, and other distinguished members of the Children's Committee; we are submitting testimony written by: Kiley Pratt & Hannah Scott, Yale School of Public Health Fellows, and Thomas Nuccio & Megan Baker, Lead Children's and Asian American Pacific Islander Policy Analysts for the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity (CWCSEO).

Our Commission wishes to **express support** for the following bills before you: **S.B. 929** and **H.B. 5194**.

**\*[S.B. No. 929](#) AN ACT EXPANDING SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS TO PROVIDE FREE SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS**

As a response to the pandemic, Connecticut began offering free school breakfasts and lunches to all public-school students. This program expired at the end of 2022.<sup>1</sup> **We believe continuing this program would be impactful to the ongoing wellbeing of all of Connecticut's public-school students.** Expanding free school meal programs to all students recognizes positive learning, nutritional, and financial benefits. Several studies have demonstrated the valuable impacts of school breakfast programs on academic performance, as well as their contribution to decreasing absences and tardiness.<sup>2</sup> Children experiencing hunger are more likely to be tardy, have lower grades, and struggle with behavioral and academic success.<sup>3</sup> National data estimates that free or

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fox61.com/article/news/education/school-squad/federal-funding-free-school-lunch-to-expire-food-security/520-f54ffbfa-78af-447e-948a-77009c67df0d#:~:text=%E2%80%9420Major%20changes%20coming%20to%20school,1>.

<sup>2</sup> Meyers AF, Sampson AE, Weitzman M, Rogers BL, Kayne H. School Breakfast Program and School Performance. Am J Dis Child. 1989;143(10):1234–1239. doi:10.1001/archpedi.1989.02150220142035

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



reduced-price lunches improve health outcomes by at least 29% and lower food insecurity by at least 3.8%.<sup>4</sup>

Further, National School Lunch Program participating households have saved an average of 10% on their grocery purchases.<sup>5</sup> Continuing free school meals will address hunger and alleviate financial difficulty for Connecticut families.

### **\*H.B. No. 5194 AN ACT ESTABLISHING A GRIEF COUNSELING PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN**

Grief often includes physiological distress, separation anxiety, confusion, yearning, obsessive dwelling on the past, and apprehension about the future.<sup>6</sup> Based on the Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model, 11.86% (111,128) of all youth under the age of 25 in Connecticut will experience bereavement due to the death of a parent or sibling.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, young people who experience grief are 66% more likely to report self-harm and 75% more likely to report suicidal ideation than young people who do not.<sup>8</sup> Youth who experience grief are 75% more likely to report suicidal ideation than youth who do not experience grief. Black and Latino youth are more likely to experience traumatic events and deaths of multiple loved ones than White youth. Sociocultural stressors such as racial and ethnic discrimination, stigmatization of mental health, and a lack of access to trauma support resources contribute to higher rates of post-traumatic stress symptoms in Black and Latino communities.<sup>9</sup>

**The Commission supports the increase of grief counseling services for children.** This bill's establishment of a state-wide grant program to fund grief counseling will benefit impacted children by connecting them with preventative mental health resources and providing an accessible outlet for personalized grief care.

<sup>4</sup> Boone, Kelsey, et al. "Benefits of School Lunch." Food Research & Action Center, 25 Jan. 2023, <https://frac.org/programs/national-school-lunch-program/benefits-school-lunch#:~:text=Research%20shows%20that%20receiving%20free,especially%20for%20fruits%20and%20vegetables>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.yahoo.com/video/free-school-lunches-lower-grocery-090015177.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xILmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAACC4PFwc7Ymj7z7fC8BTtMSW-5Q8Ggb6TQGWRgE3qL744SSrmGL4AU9gZZX3CXccvYVw0gNp1s0rXtL8TUVbruRF\\_GXbsGD2YFBnaCpa6S9Ehe\\_f1x8EC7JVSPS1x0zGswWsf3uMfMz-jz5WAZO2Sm5aqa8LASdbJ8uyYCjQE8a8](https://www.yahoo.com/video/free-school-lunches-lower-grocery-090015177.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xILmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAACC4PFwc7Ymj7z7fC8BTtMSW-5Q8Ggb6TQGWRgE3qL744SSrmGL4AU9gZZX3CXccvYVw0gNp1s0rXtL8TUVbruRF_GXbsGD2YFBnaCpa6S9Ehe_f1x8EC7JVSPS1x0zGswWsf3uMfMz-jz5WAZO2Sm5aqa8LASdbJ8uyYCjQE8a8)

<sup>6</sup> [Grief \(apa.org\)](https://www.apa.org)

<sup>7</sup> Burns, M., Griesse B., King, S., & Talmi, A. (2020). Childhood bereavement: Understanding prevalence and related adversity in the United States. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 90 (4), 391-405.

<sup>8</sup> Cathryn Rodway, Saied Ibrahim, Su-Gwan Tham, Pauline Turnbull, Nav Kapur, Louis Appleby, Bereavement and suicide bereavement as an antecedent of suicide in children and young people: Prevalence and characteristics, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Volume 300, 2022, Pages 280-288

<sup>9</sup> Burns, M., Griesse B., King, S., & Talmi, A. (2020). Childhood bereavement: Understanding prevalence and related adversity in the United States. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 90 (4), 391-405.



Caregivers of youth are often dealing with grief themselves which makes it difficult to support a child and provide the necessary support. As a result, this leaves children feeling a sense of isolation. Three main types of treatment for bereavement and grief in children include: **child-focused individual group, family focused supports, and residential camps**. Implementing grief-related supports within schools allows children to form a connection with other children who are in the same environments and often allows for social support beyond the school setting.<sup>10</sup>

We appreciate the leadership of the Children's Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

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<sup>10</sup> Linder et al., 2022